Schenectady Police Community Hiring Panel

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Summary:
The Schenectady Police Department established the Community Hiring Panel, a partnership between law enforcement and local communities, with the goal of increasing trust in police and improving hiring practices.

Problem

Police agencies and policing legitimacy are under scrutiny, especially in minority communities. Improving police-community relations is at the forefront for police agencies, and involving the community in organizational change can reduce challenges and improve relations. While traditional crime reduction tactics place special emphasis on enforcement, modern-day policing incorporates an alternative approach with community-oriented policing, which seeks to increase community involvement to decrease criminal activity. Following [Executive Order 203](#), the Schenectady Police Department engaged in a Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative. These discussions with the community led the police department to alter their hiring practices by actively encouraging diverse officer recruitment and reflecting community values. Through these efforts, the department developed the Community Hiring Panel.

Program Description

The Schenectady Police Department believes it can increase the effectiveness of policing and improve police-community relationships by involving community members in the hiring process for new police officers. The Community Hiring Panel brings community members together to talk with each police officer candidate and provide feedback to the department. Law enforcement gain insight into desired police characteristics from a community point of view, and the community has a voice when new officers are hired to police their communities. The Schenectady Police Department invited seven community members to sit on its Community Hiring Panel. The Schenectady police chief selects panel members, who come from diverse backgrounds reflecting the demographics of Schenectady (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status, education, etc.) and who are active community members (e.g., faith-involved, activist, promoting justice, NAACP member, etc.). Panelists cannot be politicians/elected officials and must either live or work in Schenectady.

The Community Hiring Panel leads discussions with each of the police officer candidates as they near the end of the hiring process. Conversations last for up to 45 minutes and focus on candidates' experience, their engagement in urban communities and the community's expectations. The group discussion is informal and allows candidates to openly discuss their personal interest in the community. Panelists guide the conversation by asking questions that have been previously approved by the chief, but there are not prescriptive questions each candidate must answer.

Police command staff monitor the interaction virtually, observing everything from the candidates' body language to their interaction with the panelists. Once completed, the panel members report their observations of the candidate to the police chief. Each candidate receives a letter grade between "A" (exceptional) and "F" (not fitting the needs of the community). While input from the panel does not determine a nomination, members' insights

influence final hiring decisions. Since its inception, the Schenectady Police Department hired 41 officers through the Community Hiring Panel, and interviewed three candidates who did not advance past the Community Hiring Panel as a result of members' feedback.

This selection process complies with statutory and regulatory requirements pertaining to hiring, and builds upon the standards and procedures for police candidates set forth by the New York State Municipal Police Training Council (MPTC). The Schenectady Police Department recognizes that community input is critical and provides a unique perspective. This group of community stakeholders provides insight into what members of the community consider a successful officer to work within its neighborhoods.

Funding

The Schenectady Police Department supports occasional expenses accrued during the Community Hiring Panel (e.g., meals for panelists). Community members volunteer their time.

Relevant Partnerships

Members of the hiring panel participate from various local organizations, such as C.O.C.O.A House, the Social Enterprise and Training (SEAT) Center, Youth L.I.F.E Support Network, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)- Schenectady.

Program Reviews or Evaluations

The Schenectady Police Department in 2023 partnered with the Finn Institute to examine this hiring approach. Results will likely be available in 2025.

Supportive Research

During the 1970s, the San Diego Police Department established the San Diego Community-Oriented Policing Project, which outlined the foundation of contemporary community policing. Research findings suggested that developing strong relationships with members of the community, instead of random patrolling, was more beneficial and effective. Results of the project indicated that community interaction improved the attitudes of officers toward their profession and the communities they served.

Schenectady Police Department's new approach shifts the paradigm of traditional policing from an "us versus them" or "warrior" approach to a "guardian" role. The "us vs. them" mentality encouraged officers to always be on guard when interacting with the public. Treating every encounter with this mindset and viewing every citizen as a potential threat does not build cooperation and trust within the community. Most police work is guardian work – protecting the community – and should be conducted in a procedurally

just way. Police professionals believe the adoption of a guardian mindset will build trust and legitimacy within the agency and with the public.

In recent years, concerns have been raised about the limitations of community policing and potential for corruption. A national study conducted on the effectiveness of community advisory boards, similar to Schenectady's hiring panel, show that in order for the advisory board to be effective, it must also be purposeful. The composition of members and their backgrounds must vary, but their overall objective must be the same. When implemented correctly, community advisory boards improve the relationship between law enforcement and the community.

Critical Success Factors

- Identifying and including appropriate members to be part of the panel is critical in the process. Members should reflect the diversity of the community, share concerns surrounding police legitimacy, and understand the value of police officers within society.

- Protecting the panel from political input ensures the validity of the panel voice. The police chief selects the panel members and does not take suggestions from the mayor or elected city officials.

- Develop shared common goals of the panel to safeguard the mission to improve police-community relations. Panel members should want police to help keep the community safe in a just and legitimate manner.

Lessons Learned

- Consider an inclusive and diverse panel. Originally, people of color exclusively participated as panelists. Command staff have since broadened the criteria for panelists and now include any resident who offers beneficial insight to the group-led discussions.

- Allow for flexible conversation. Initially, panelists submitted questions for the candidate in advance. Over time, the panel took a more informal approach, with members using consistent discussion topics to engage in a conversation with each candidate.